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# Unit Operations: An Approach To Videogame Criticism (MIT Press)



## Synopsis

In *Unit Operations*, Ian Bogost argues that similar principles underlie both literary theory and computation, proposing a literary-technical theory that can be used to analyze particular videogames. Moreover, this approach can be applied beyond videogames: Bogost suggests that any medium -- from videogames to poetry, literature, cinema, or art -- can be read as a configurative system of discrete, interlocking units of meaning, and he illustrates this method of analysis with examples from all these fields. The marriage of literary theory and information technology, he argues, will help humanists take technology more seriously and help technologists better understand software and videogames as cultural artifacts. This approach is especially useful for the comparative analysis of digital and nondigital artifacts and allows scholars from other fields who are interested in studying videogames to avoid the esoteric isolation of "game studies." The richness of Bogost's comparative approach can be seen in his discussions of works by such philosophers and theorists as Plato, Badiou, Žižek, and McLuhan, and in his analysis of numerous videogames including Pong, Half-Life, and Star Wars Galaxies. Bogost draws on object technology and complex adaptive systems theory for his method of unit analysis, underscoring the configurative aspects of a wide variety of human processes. His extended analysis of freedom in large virtual spaces examines Grand Theft Auto 3, The Legend of Zelda, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and Joyce's *Ulysses*. In *Unit Operations*, Bogost not only offers a new methodology for videogame criticism but argues for the possibility of real collaboration between the humanities and information technology.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Bogost challenges humanists and technologists to pay attention to one another, something they desperately need to do as computation accelerates us into the red zones of widespread virtual reality. This book gives us what we need to meet that challenge: a general theory for understanding creativity under computation, one that will apply increasingly to all creativity in the future. Not only that, but we get an outstanding theory of videogame criticism in the mix as well. Highly recommended. (Edward Castronova, Department of Telecommunications, Indiana University, author of *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*) *Unit Operations* is a major milestone on the path to establishing a framework for analyzing videogames as important cultural artifacts of our time. Proposing a comparative approach to videogame criticism that is equally relevant for humanists and technologists, Ian Bogost weaves philosophy, psychoanalysis, literature, and film, media theory, informatics, software, and videogames into a narrative that reveals how these seemingly disparate fields relate to and inform each other. Unit operations -- discrete, programming units of meaning -- are used as the conceptual tool for unpacking complex relationships between different worlds: criticisms and computation, genetics and complex adaptive systems, and narrative spaces from *Casablanca* and *Half-Life* to *Ulysses* and *Grand Theft Auto*. (Christiane Paul, Adjunct Curator of New Media Arts, Whitney Museum of American Art)

Ian Bogost is Ivan Allen College Distinguished Chair in Media Studies and Professor of Interactive Computing at the Georgia Institute of Technology, a Founding Partner at Persuasive Games LLC, and the coauthor of *Newsgames: Journalism at Play* (MIT Press, 2010).

This is how interdisciplinarity is done: Bogost weaves *Madame Bovary*, *Grand Theft Auto*, cellular automata and Deleuze together into a powerful theory cutting through the my-piece-of-the-elephant scholarship which dominates games studies. If you have a particular need to feel uncultured and slow witted, this is definitely a 5 star recommendation: it's terrifyingly erudite while being, if not a stroll in the park, at least a manageable uphill hike through difficult terrain.

*Unit Operations* is every bit as brilliant - and damn fun a read - as those of us lucky enough to've had early glimpses at Bogost's project had hoped. It's tempting to write a review of this book in the form of a treatment for a mega-million-dollar console game, and that temptation seems to me no

accident: this book will change the way you pay attention to ALL, in both senses of the word, coded systems you yourself use. The backstory of the book's authoring is itself almost too Hollywood (or new Hollywood, since EA, Blizzard, and LucasArts are the MGM, WB, and Disney of our era): author was a Chief Technology Officer for an A-list interactive marketing agency in L.A.; author leaves the biz to become a professor working on recombining the DNA (and languages and ontologies) of software development with the DNA (and languages and ontologies) of literary and cultural criticism; his mutant creation is now on the loose. Your mission, reader, is to... To what? Because in the game of Unit Operations, the first-person shooter is transformed into something of an Eleatic archer: where before our attention would just race to the next target, Unit Operations teaches us new ways to listen to the Bow. The open-source software movement has from its beginning been particularly well-attuned to games with written language's units of operation. Unit Operations provides a long-awaited common ground for both technological and literary culture. Not since first reading Geertz' Interpretation of Cultures have I had the sense of encountering so path-breaking a work in the level of its critical innovation and the clarity of its readings.

The first chapter is full of philosophical jargon. I understand that the author attempts to pave the way to his own method called 'unit analysis' through his interpretation and analysis of the preceding philosophers' theories. However, as a reader without a philosophical background, I find it extremely hard to figure out what those philosophers are talking about. They seem to just take some conceptions out of nowhere and, without a clear definition of what such conceptions are, begin to make up connections between them. This is really annoying. Furthermore, it inevitably impairs the credibility of the author's own theory. And it is reasonable to believe that this is the case for most readers who don't know too much about philosophy.

This book isn't what it sounds like at first glance. It is a view of video games from a literary criticism perspective. Don't buy this if you're interested in game design if you don't also have a passion for literary criticism.

low price and high quality. awesome and very well. As a professional chef i need and use top quality knives. I have a number of well known brands and most are high quality. This product, however, particularly because of the price, is as good or better than most all of them. I am buying now just to have at this price. Don't wait get it, or get two. great, for myself,

Works perfectly. great product, exceptional customer service just plain magic all year long. nice and affordable quick purchase and delivery. Everything I received was fine and in a timely maner

Bogost's begins with a promising venture into the video game territory. This time we are promised that video games are distinguished from books and films, and that the "ludology" of video games is recognized as an independent field. Bogost uses philosophy in order to accomplish this mission. Although when it comes to critical arguments, Bogost's approach is mainly Badiouian, he sets forth a rich array of classical and contemporary philosophies, from Plato to Spinoza, Deleuze, and Harman. I have this feeling that at some point Bogost emphasizes too much on the narrative and cultural aspects of video games and therefore, his project falls into the same category of mainstream cultural critiques of video games. But there are sections which penetrate right into the structure of games and their architecture. In these sections, Bogost uses a heavy deal of Badiou's axiomatic set theory to back up his theory of unit operations. This is not essentially a negative point but he could develop a genuine theory of his own and eliminate the risk of associating video games with philosophy which for the most part has the same restricting role of literature (the narrative) and cinema (the filmic) for video games. Overall, Unit Operations is a rich and an insightful book, but falls short in some of its ambitions.

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